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Chair

Mr. Pat Finnigan

Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

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● (0845)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Pat Finnigan (Miramichi—Grand Lake, Lib.)): Hello.

[*English*]

Welcome, everyone, to our committee as we pursue our study on mental health challenges in the agricultural community.

With us this morning we have Rebecca Lee, executive director of the Canadian Horticultural Council. Welcome again, Rebecca. Thank you for being here with us today. We also have Beth Connery, chair of the labour committee. Welcome, Beth, to our committee.

Also, from the Ontario Sheep Farmers, we have Ms. Jennifer MacTavish, general manager. Welcome to our committee, Ms. MacTavish.

We will start with a six-minute opening statement.

Do you want to start, Ms. MacTavish, for six minutes? Thank you.

Ms. Jennifer MacTavish (General Manager, Ontario Sheep Farmers): I'm here this morning on behalf of the Ontario Sheep Farmers. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to talk about farmer mental health.

Ontario Sheep Farmers represents 3,000 farmers, who contribute over $465 million to Ontario's economy. Ontario is home to the country's largest sheep flock. We process over 50% of all the sheep and lambs born in Canada. Together with our partners Alberta and Quebec, we have formed the "national sheep network", which leverages the provincial resources we have in order to work collaboratively on topics of mutual interest.

Perhaps more importantly, though, I'm here today as someone who has worked for and with farmers for almost 17 years, and has grown increasingly concerned about their mental health. While much of my career has focused on promoting agriculture and business risk management—when it comes to livestock, that often means animal health—farmer mental health was never top of mind.

A few years ago, I took a mental health first aid course offered by the Canadian Mental Health Association. Sitting in a room full of first responders and social workers, I found myself thinking about the farmers in Wellington County, who at that time were dealing with an outbreak of avian influenza. Prior to taking the course, I had been reading accounts from farmers who had spoken of the social isolation that comes from having an infected flock. One account that stays with me was a farmer's painful recollection of no one wanting to sit beside his family in church.

Leaving that course, I recalled the times when farmers had called me, distressed about how low land prices were or frustrated by the new regulations that were coming into effect. One time a farmer sat across the table from me and tearfully recounted how a coyote had maimed his daughter's 4-H lamb. I couldn't help but wonder if I had done enough for them. Did I offer them enough support, or had I been sighing in frustration because there was nothing I could do about low land prices? Was I perhaps trying to get off the phone as quickly as possible so that I could get on with my "real work"?

I started to talk to anyone who would listen about my concerns around farmer mental health. To be honest, at the time the audience was small. It is heartening to see that since then, the audience has grown and the agricultural community has come together around this issue. Thankfully, Dr. Andria Jones-Bitton at the University of Guelph not only listened to me but grabbed hold and threw herself into researching farmer mental health. Her research has been instrumental in not only encouraging a dialogue around farmer mental health but also shaping the way in which we understand it.

We know that farming is a high-risk industry that requires an incredible capacity to deal with volatility and uncertainty. Over the course of this last year alone, Canadian farmers have endured drought, porcine epidemic diarrhea, and the financial impacts of the negotiation and subsequent signing of NAFTA 2.0, the U.S.-Mexico-Canada agreement. While we can acknowledge that all of these examples may impact a farmer's business, it's not often that the conversation delves into how these challenges are both out of the farmer's control and have the capacity to impact their mental health, which in turn impacts their productivity and farm viability.

Add to this that as farms grow larger, farmers are becoming more physically isolated and are growing increasingly socially isolated. The public understands less and less about farming, and in some cases it is vilifying agriculture as a whole, and farmers as individuals.

Historically, farmers have been dealing with these burdens quietly and stoically on their own. We need to change this. A failure to address farmer mental health poses a serious threat to the sustainability and viability of Canadian agriculture. Dr. Jones-Bitton's research confirms that farmers face high stress, anxiety and depression. They are also reporting low levels of resilience and a high risk of burnout. In addition, there have been many media reports citing that farming is one of the most stressful occupations worldwide. In occupations in the U.S., death by suicide is highest amongst farmers.

Not widely understood are the impacts that poor mental health and low resilience have on farming. Based on research about the impacts of mental health in other occupations, we can surmise that poor mental health in farming threatens farm productivity, is a barrier to growth and innovation, and may contribute to the ongoing attrition of farmers. As a representative of the livestock industry, I cannot ignore the fact that farmers' mental health most likely impacts their ability to provide adequate care for their animals. While I appreciate that we cannot eliminate all of the stresses of farming, we need to support our farmers so that they not only survive but also thrive.

● (0850)

We also need to make sure that programs and support for farmers are designed by farmers. One cannot simply adapt programs designed for the general population; they will fail in the agricultural context. For example, recommending vacations or spending more time in nature does not resonate well with farmers, nor is it really applicable in a farming context.

I see the sign, so I'm going to skip down to my last paragraph.

It is difficult to reconcile how we will be able to have a sustainable food system in Canada if we do not have healthy farmers. Canadian farmers are telling us that their mental health is a serious issue, and they are demonstrating that they need help. This needs to be addressed.

It is time for us to step up and start taking better care of the people who are feeding us.

The Chair: Now we'll move on to the Canadian Horticultural Council. Who wants to start?

Dr. Rebecca Lee (Executive Director, Canadian Horticultural Council): I'll start, and then we'll switch.

The Chair: Sure.

Dr. Rebecca Lee: Thank you very much for having us here.

Good morning, everybody. We are very pleased to provide input into your study on mental health challenges in agriculture.

The Canadian Horticultural Council is an Ottawa-based, voluntary, not-for-profit national association that represents fruit and vegetable growers across Canada involved in the production of more than 120 different types of crops, with farm cash receipts of $5.4 billion in 2017. This is the foundation for an estimated produce value chain of nearly $14 billion of real GDP and 181,600 Canadian jobs.

For almost a century, CHC has advocated issues that impact Canada's horticultural sector. We promote healthy, safe and sustainable food while ensuring the continued success and growth of our industry.

Ms. Elizabeth Connery (Chair, Labour Committee, Canadian Horticultural Council): To achieve such growth and success requires affirmative support and the existence of business conditions that will motivate farmers to continue with their lifestyle.

My name is Beth Connery. I'm chair of the Canadian Horticultural Council's labour committee, and I would like to share with you some of my experience.

These people operate under incredible stressors. Financial pressures, labour shortages, reduced competitiveness, and weather challenges are all being faced on a daily basis. Labour, in particular, is an ongoing issue for horticultural producers. We rely heavily on the seasonal agricultural worker program to provide needed employees for planting, harvesting and packing our produce. This past year, many employers had difficulty sourcing their employees in a timely fashion. This meant that there were crops not sown or transplanted, and other crops that were ready out in the field with no one to harvest them. We work with very thin margins, and starting a crop year with a loss makes it very hard to work long hours for the rest of the year in the hopes of covering that loss and making even a marginal profit.

Farmers, like most people, have a variety of coping mechanisms and reactions to stress, anxiety and depression. They run the gamut from keeping busy—at anything—to avoidance and procrastination. Many tasks are done alone, increasing a sense of isolation. Even those who have dealt with depression in the past can be caught unawares by this insidious disease.

This past spring and summer saw drought-like conditions in Manitoba. A friend thought they were dealing with the stress fairly well—talking with friends, exercising, practising self-care—all the usual recommendations they had learned when dealing with depression previously. Then came the first significant rainfall of the season, and they realized that a load had been lifted off their shoulders. The smiles came more readily, and they felt better.

Farming organizations are becoming more concerned with the mental health issues their members are facing, and most, if not all, are providing links to resources in their communications. Social media campaigns are actively promoting the information and resources. The Do More Agriculture Foundation has been formed, and the University of Guelph is developing resources as a result of the mental health survey many of us participated in.

As a farming family, we are very cognizant of the pressures and results of anxiety and depression. In June 2012, we became suicide-loss survivors when my husband died of depression. His brother and business partner had died of a heart attack six months previously, and he was under increased pressure to do both jobs. We had dealt with his depression before, but the added pressure was finally too much for my husband.

In my opinion, these people are not choosing to leave their families, nor are they avoiding the problems they are facing. They are choosing to end the pain they are living with. This is not something I can understand, because I have never had the feelings they obviously do, but we are left to pick up the pieces and move forward as well as we can.

We have had many family and one-on-one conversations about the importance of mental health. We have had access to and used counsellors on various occasions, both as a family and individually. One of us has called the rural help line to talk when they needed it. It was considered to be a positive experience because they felt forward motion when counselling sessions were set up for them.

The downfall of some of these systems is their lack of familiarity with the farming community when we finally see a counsellor. For most farmers, farmer is what they are; it is not what they do. The distinction can be very important when dealing with emotions and a new path forward.

There are immense pressures on farm families today, and we want to rise to the challenge, but we need help in dealing with the issues that are within the control of regulators. Things like weather we have no control over. For me personally, right now, it's been raining in Manitoba—finally—for the last month, but that means that I have a million dollars' worth of carrots sitting out in the field and no way of getting them in. That is going to crater anybody's business plan.

Government needs to enable us, not hobble us. We are proud to produce safe and nutritious food for our families and consumers to eat. We believe we are good stewards of our lands and plan to pass our farm businesses down to succeeding generations as they were passed on to us. However, the current pressures can make us look at our children and wonder if we really want to put them through what we are experiencing.

Again, thank you very much for this opportunity. I would welcome any questions for follow-up.

● (0855)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Connery.

We will now start with our questions. I want to welcome Mr. Lloyd and Mr. Motz, who are also on our committee today. In replacement, I think we have Mr. Tabbara and my colleague at Fisheries and Oceans, Colin Fraser, here with us today.

We welcome everyone today, including the rest of our regular members.

We will start with Mr. Dreeshen for six minutes.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen (Red Deer—Mountain View, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

To all of our witnesses today, thank you for being here.

Ms. Connery, certainly our hearts go out to you, understanding just how difficult it is to be in that type of situation. Then, of course, it falls to people such as you to carry on, and with the difficulties that are there.

One of the things you mentioned was that government needs "to enable, not hobble". I think that's a critical aspect, because I don't think we look at it from the three levels of government...and the things that happen.

We are talking about federal issues here, because we have some capacity to help in that regard. There are also provincial regulations that you have to deal with, with labour standards and that type of thing. Even municipally, there are acreage owners who are coming in, wondering why every once in a while it smells—because manure is put on the land—and why it's dusty. The odd time they say you should be shutting it down so they can get some sleep. These are things that we never had to worry about.

I wonder, Ms. Connery, if you could speak to the labour side of it and whether there are issues there. In Alberta, we're at a stage now where they're saying that if there's a certain number of people, they have the right to unionize. There's just no relationship to the investment that one has in the operation versus those people who will come and go on a day-to-day basis.

We understand the security of person and so on, and why there has to be safety, but are those issues that you feel are creeping into your industry as well?

● (0900)

Ms. Elizabeth Connery: In vegetable and fruit growing, and many of the other horticulture industries, labour is an incredibly key issue. We cannot operate without enough labour. We cannot get enough labour from the Canadian market, and that is why many of us use SAWP or the Ag stream from the temporary foreign worker program. Without those people, we cannot operate. It comes down to that.

Also, it appears that the system has become more complicated as we go along. Certainly, 25 years ago the paperwork was not nearly at this level. We have no objection to playing within the rules, and to there being clear and defined rules, but we need to have access to those people.

On our farm, we have about 56 foreign workers who come in during the year. They start in May, when we start our crops. We start with asparagus. We actually have a six-month harvest period. For those of you who know how busy a harvest is, ours is for six months. We have those guys—and mostly we have guys—stay for the full length of our term, right through the end of September and into October, depending on when we're done with our broccoli and carrots—which I hope we'll finish sometime.

Without those people, we can't operate, and this is true for almost all horticulture operations. It's a necessity.

I know people think that we should be able to find workers here, or that people who come up should have a pathway to permanent residence. That is something we would be happy about for some of our employees. However, we do not have work for them for the other four or six months of the year, so how is the Canadian population going to support them for that time?

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: When we talk about that.... I know people who are involved in the business that you are. With the other stressors, it comes down to having to buy a $250,000 piece of machinery to take out five or six people who would be working on the line, because you just can't afford it.

Of course, the other thing, sadly—not so much with the foreign workers but with other workers—is that if they're supposed to be there on a certain day, maybe you're going to get a phone call saying they're not coming—or maybe you're not. These are the other issues. How do you run a business that way?

Ms. MacTavish, one of the things you mentioned was the vilification of the industry and attacks that come from what I would suggest are vested interests. Whatever they are trying to do just ends up doing damage to the farms.

Could you explain that in the short time I have left?

Ms. Jennifer MacTavish: Sure.

There are a couple of different examples.

One is that specifically when we are dealing with ruminant agriculture, people think that grazing cows and sheep is ruining the environment. They'll say that they don't want to be grazing animals anymore. Really, when we're grazing pasture land, we're renewing soil health and providing habitats for pollinators and birds.

There are always.... I shouldn't say that so emphatically. There are oftentimes these black and white stances: "We shouldn't eat meat. We shouldn't be raising animals. We shouldn't be grazing animals."

For people who are farming livestock, that can be very hard to hear sometimes.

● (0905)

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dreeshen.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Drouin, you have six minutes.

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

I'd like to ask Ms. MacTavish and maybe the CHC about this. In terms of the way you're bringing that conversation on mental health to your membership, is that conversation happening?

In Ontario, for instance, I know that the Ontario Federation of Agriculture has started to have those discussions. But, as you know, unless there's a major issue, sometimes attendance can be somewhat sparse. If there's a major issue, people show up. If there isn't a major issue, attendance is usually at a lower level.

How do you communicate that message, and what have you been doing in terms of providing that message to farmers and saying, "Hey, it's okay to reach out"?

Ms. Jennifer MacTavish: In our context around the sheep table, it's a bit different. I have four board members who have dealt with suicide since January, whether it was that of another farmer they knew or somebody within their small community. Around our board table, the discussion is perhaps a bit different from discussions around other board tables. I'm also really stubborn and just talk about what I think needs to get talked about, which is mental health. I am really concerned about them.

I'm very lucky with the sheep farmers in Ontario, in particular. They have really been opening up and creating an environment where it's okay for them to call me up and let me know what's going on. I've learned from some of the courses I've been taking to challenge myself when I start to feel afraid to ask how they're doing. I force myself to just ask them the question and then be willing to sit there, listen to them and create that environment for them to be comfortable doing that.

Mr. Francis Drouin: That's great.

Do you want to jump in, Ms. Connery?

Ms. Elizabeth Connery: Sure. The CHC itself has a publication called "Fresh Thinking", and this is actually one of the topics in our issue this fall. I also find that almost every commodity has this on their communications list this year. Most of us are very tuned in to Twitter, Facebook and all those kinds of things, and it's all over the place.

Also, I think that with the advent of more women on boards there is more ability to have those conversations and to keep them going. Very often, it doesn't matter what the meeting is about; if you're having a group meeting, people are tacking that on as an item so that it gets repeated as they go along.

Mr. Francis Drouin: A witness on Tuesday was a social worker who was previously a farmer. She goes out directly to farms to do a sort of health check: "How are you doing? Do you need help?"

Is this something that you guys are working on as well? Or would you push for a program like this within your provinces?

Ms. Elizabeth Connery: I would think that programming like that would be helpful. We haven't started pushing for anything like that yet, although certainly we have a good relationship with our ag department and some of the other departments where you could ask for that.

As always, it comes down to a case of resources. We're balancing what we need with what they are going to deal with.

Mr. Francis Drouin: One of the issues where we're trying to come up with a recommendation is the issue of fighting that stigma in terms of mental health. It's ever-present for farmers and within the farming community, but it's also present within the general population.

Ms. Connery, you've touched on an important point. Often, when you go to your doctor, they will prescribe for you what they prescribe for the general population, as opposed to having, say, a customized kit for farmers. If there were a few recommendations that you would propose to this committee, understanding that health care delivery is provincial, is there something that the Canadian Mental Health Association could be doing, for instance, to better target farmers?

Ms. Elizabeth Connery: I think that perhaps it's about making sure that those who are in contact with farmers actually have a farming background so they understand the time pressures, the constraints and the isolation. Also, it's about making sure that people are talking. Certainly, six years ago at my husband's funeral, we stated what happened, and that started a conversation in our community—rather than hiding what happened and saying, "He died of mysterious causes." No. It started a conversation, particularly for us in our age group, but certainly it was able to carry down into the younger generations, as well, to talk about the fact that mental health is important. You have to take care of yourself. You have to talk to other people.

Trying to get that message out is very hard to do. Certainly, having an ag background would make things more effective, because when you finally do get to counselling, you get suggestions that are just not practical on a farm and that you cannot implement. Go on a holiday...? Well, I can't do that for eight months of the year. I could plan for one in 10 months, but that's not helping me right now.

Having that understanding, finding different ways to cope and creating avenues for people to talk would be a very good way to start.

● (0910)

Ms. Jennifer MacTavish: I want to add that I think this is where Dr. Jones-Bitton's work really comes in handy. She's been doing a lot of participatory research with farmers and is advocating for a centre of research, a central hub in Guelph where we can talk to farmers and make sure that the programming that's designed for them works for them.

I would also recommend that anybody who works with farmers day to day—whether an industry association person, a feed rep, a manufacturer or a banker—take a mental health first aid course so they can recognize the signs of somebody in distress, make themselves feel comfortable asking farmers how things are going, and know where the resources are.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. MacGregor, you have six minutes.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'll start with Ms. MacTavish. We had a conversation before committee about our love of sheep. Sheep are amazing animals. I have a very tiny flock. I've had wool from my flock spun and knitted into a Cowichan sweater. I'm from Vancouver Island, so I had Cowichan Tribes knit my sweater.

There are a lot of misconceptions about animal husbandry and the critical role it plays, not only on the farm but in our economy. I know that in some cases the concerns out there are justified. However, as you said, I don't think there's a really clear understanding of how animals are raised. It is in the farmers' best interests to make sure their animals are healthy. This is the source of their income.

I'm interested in how we go forward. Rather than having the two sides talk at each other, in what ways can we have a conversation, a respectful dialogue where we start fermenting the value of farmers? Do you have any suggestions on that?

Ms. Jennifer MacTavish: There are a couple of pretty creative things that we could do. For instance, one of the research projects we're looking into right now is working with conservation groups that are interested in grassland habitat so that they understand from an urban perspective the importance of grazing livestock and what it brings to the role.

In the sheep industry specifically, we're also dealing with knitters and weavers, because the sheep provide a biodegradable, renewable clothing source. You can also insulate homes with wool and mop up oil spills with wool. We have a different story to tell when it comes to sheep.

I think we have to start by enabling our farmers to feel more comfortable telling their stories. They're our front-line environmentalists. They told me before anybody else did that the butterfly population is dropping. We need to make them feel comfortable telling their story. We need to find groups that we can start working with one-on-one to build those relationships. That would be my recommendation.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you.

Ms. Connery, we had a conversation before about the labour troubles. I know this is an ongoing issue. I speak for the farmers in my region. Yes, absolutely, if they could hire local people, they would, but no one is stepping up to the plate to take those jobs, so they often have to rely on seasonal, temporary foreign workers.

In the context of this study, there are a lot of variables that farmers can't control. You mentioned the weather. However, there are some that we can, and I think labour is one of them. I wonder if you could go into a little more detail. Are there any specific recommendations that you want this committee to make with respect to the seasonal worker program so that we could help alleviate the mental health stresses that many people in your profession face?

● (0915)

Ms. Elizabeth Connery: We've had an ag labour-front round table this year that has been working hard on this issue. From our perspective, one of the government's issues—and they are working at breaking it down—is the different silos that people who deal with our program appear to be in. We go through various departments, such as ESDC and IRCC, and things have to be handed from one side to the other. Sometimes there is not enough communication about what's going on there.

New things come up. This year there's biometrics; it's going to be a new issue for us. ESDC did not find out until about spring, so it couldn't start letting IRCC know the implications of the change. We're going to have to deal with that this year. So, communication between departments would certainly help.

From a farmer's perspective, one of the things we would like to see is some clarity on where we are in the process. We send in our applications, and then we sit and wait. We don't know how far things have moved along, whether they have or haven't. It's about having some kind of tracking system to know when the LMIA has been approved, whether the information has been sent down to the sending country, whether that information has been forwarded to IRCC, and whether IRCC has received it. If we know that things are in progress or that they've stalled somewhere, we could ask questions or answer questions that need to be answered so that things can proceed. Those kinds of things would certainly help us and give us a much better time frame and frame of mind. Many of us were sitting there last spring wondering when we were going to have people show up. We were sitting with crops in the field and we were losing those crops. It was very difficult.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I can remember one of my summer jobs as a teenager, which was working at a blueberry farm. In the month of July, you'd have that window of a couple of weeks, and if you waited too long, they'd be done. I can only imagine the stress when you're seeing your life's work out there in the field and it's not coming in. You'd be very shaken.

I have only a few seconds left, so I'll yield my time. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: That's all right.

The Chair: Thanks, Mr. MacGregor.

Now we have Mr. Peschisolido for six minutes.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido (Steveston—Richmond East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Witnesses, thank you for coming here today.

I would like to follow up on Mr. Dreeshen's points. He made two good points, I think. One was the comment on enabling, not hobbling, and the second was about the fact that it's not just one area. There's the federal government, the provincial government, and local organizations that deal with the challenges that farmers have.

Can you elaborate a little on how we can deal with these challenges? What's working there? What do you think that we as a society—not as a federal government but as a society—could focus on that's actually a good thing?

Ms. Elizabeth Connery: One of the things we're working on at the Canadian Horticultural Council, and through ESDC, is coming up with a national housing standard for the employees we're bringing in through SAWP and through some of the other programs. The difficulty is that every province and municipality has a different standard. How do you find one that is common to everyone across the country that enables you to create a national standard?

I believe that in Ontario, it's the health departments that are setting those standards. In Manitoba, it's the Office of the Fire Commissioner, so fire extinguishers and those kinds of things are very important. Depending on where you are, there are very different standards. Trying to create a national standard is very difficult.

Communication across all levels of government is critical for us, but to try to ask all the municipalities in the country to get on board with one particular thing would be very difficult. Just continuing with ongoing communication is crucial for us.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: There are two terms we have heard today at committee that unfortunately we don't hear a lot at committee: "husbandry", which Mr. MacGregor brought up, and "stewards of the land". I commend you for what you do. If it weren't for farmers, we wouldn't have anything to eat. We wouldn't have our quality of life. It's a shame that there is this disconnect between the vast majority of urban and suburban folks and the farming industry.

Talking about husbandry and being stewards of the land, are there any bigger changes that we can make in the industry that could be helpful in dealing with the mental health challenges of farmers?

● (0920)

Ms. Elizabeth Connery: Communication, for us, is one way to do it, and having a common platform to communicate could potentially help. Certainly, one of the stressors we have is the difference between the public perception of what a farm is and the reality of what a farm is, including how we treat our animals, our land, our water supplies, and all of the resources we use, including the people we have as employees, because they are very important to us as well. They are all resources that we consider we need to husband and steward. They are not simply things to be used up, because our goal is to have a succession plan, to have a way for the future, for our families and for the people who want to move into the industry. Far too many people are leaving simply because they cannot deal with the stresses anymore.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: Would anyone else like to comment?

Ms. Jennifer MacTavish: Go ahead, Rebecca.

Dr. Rebecca Lee: Just briefly, one aspect that the group that represents horticultural farmers across the country would appreciate from the government would be outward communication on your part about the importance of agriculture. Agriculture involves only about 3% of the population, at best, even with all the outside industries. Obviously, it's not heavily weighted in the public perception, in the media, and in government activities as a whole, but it's fundamental. As they say, if you ate today, you have to thank a farmer. Just for us to know that the government has our back on this would be wonderful. That would be a very big step forward. Again, that's a matter of communication.

Ms. Jennifer MacTavish: I have nothing to add.

That was really eloquent, Rebecca.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: That was great.

Ms. Connery, you mentioned the lack of familiarity with farming in the mental health community. How can we change that?

Ms. Elizabeth Connery: That is a very good question. Whether it's someone who has come from the farm, or whether it is simply another set of parameters and courses that counsellors need to learn, they need to actually go out and meet farmers. Go for a tour. Farmers are very happy to have someone come out to their farms and see what's going on. They can show you what's happening. They can tell you what their time is spent at, how much time it takes to do different things, and how much time they're in isolation.

In horticulture, we spend a lot of time with other people in our industry and with people on our farms, but in lots of jobs you just go out on a tractor and go up and down the field for hours and hours during the day, or else you're out in a field doing another job. You're isolated, and when you're sitting on that tractor, you think a lot. If you are in a good frame of mind, that can be a very good thing. If you are not, though, you can find yourself trapped, rethinking really bad lines of thought.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Connery.

Thank you, Mr. Peschisolido.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nassif, you have six minutes.

Mrs. Eva Nassif (Vimy, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for their presentations.

You all spoke of mental health issues and challenges.

Can you be more specific regarding the mental health challenges in the livestock sector? Can you also tell us whether any other challenges are related to horticulture?

Let's start with Ms. MacTavish.

[*English*]

Ms. Jennifer MacTavish: I want to make sure I understand the question. Do you want specific examples of what our farmers are doing?

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Eva Nassif: Yes, exactly.

When it comes to mental health challenges, are there any differences between the livestock and horticulture sectors?

● (0925)

[*English*]

Ms. Jennifer MacTavish: I think a lot of the mental health challenges would be shared. They both have to deal with weather challenges. There are a lot of things out of their control. When we're talking about sheep specifically, it's a commodity-based pricing system. You have no control over your pricing and you have no control over your input costs. You're also trying to negotiate with Mother Nature, and she doesn't co-operate very well.

I think there are a lot of shared stressors between the different commodities.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Eva Nassif: Ms. Connery, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Ms. Elizabeth Connery: Yes, I would say there are a lot of shared stressors. They're in our industry as well. If you go to the grocery store, you have no idea that we're not growing broccoli in Canada in February. It's always there. All of those crops are there. The Canadian public really doesn't have a concept of the seasonality of our crops and how industrious we have to be during the time period they're there. There are also crops we grow that we store during the winter and that we pack out all winter as well. So in term of buying Canadian stuff, taking that message out is good.

If we're talking about specific stressors and the reactions of people.... I don't sleep well right now, for instance, with all that crop out in the field. When you are short on sleep, you are possibly not dealing with other people in as kind a way as you hope you would. You try to catch yourself as best you can, but you may not make the best decisions in the moment because you're tired and overextended.

These kinds of things happen on an ongoing basis for a lot of growers. It's very difficult when your input prices are dictated and you have to buy. We operate in a worldwide market for many of our crops. We're not dictating the price either. We're taking the best price we can negotiate in the marketplace. We are trying to find that thin margin in between and make a profit that will enable us to move forward into the future.

Certainly, with all the decisions we make on a daily basis.... In my case, it affects the lives and livelihood of 80 families. That is a pressure. These are all pressures that we are under on an ongoing basis.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Eva Nassif: I have another question.

In terms of your associations, where does the funding for mental health initiatives generally come from?

[*English*]

Ms. Jennifer MacTavish: We've taken money out of our research funding to support Dr. Jones-Bitton's work, and we are providing a lot of in-kind time to help her build her central hub at the University of Guelph.

I'll be honest. In the beginning, it was hard to find the funding, because farmers like to put research dollars into researching production and cost-effective ways of increasing production while maintaining their level of productivity. That was kind of redundant. I apologize.

The long and the short of it is that it's hard for us to find funding.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Eva Nassif: Ms. Connery, please go ahead.

[*English*]

Ms. Elizabeth Connery: The same is also true for us.

We do not have a line item that says "mental health". It is something we deal with through our labour committee and on a volunteer basis. We talk with people. We try to make sure it's an item that is out there in front of our members, to make sure they're thinking about themselves and trying to do self-care and to be aware.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Eva Nassif: How do you operate if you don't have any funding?

[*English*]

Ms. Elizabeth Connery: With great difficulty....

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Eva Nassif: I have a question regarding women.

Given the participation of women in the agricultural sector, has the way that you deal with stress changed on either farms or on the administrative boards of your associations? Has the amount of stress changed?

[*English*]

Ms. Jennifer MacTavish: I'll start.

I work with an 11-person board, and four of our board members are women under the age of 45. We did a master shepherd's course for farmers who had been farming sheep for three to nine years, and 60% of the participants were women. By far, it's changing the way we are functioning as a board.

I got the card. Sorry, I should have wrapped it up.

● (0930)

The Chair: It's okay.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Ms. Nassif.

Mrs. Eva Nassif: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Unfortunately, this is all the time we have. We have a shortened committee this morning.

Ms. MacTavish, I really appreciate your talking about maybe getting some training for some of the people who go on the farm. I thought that was a neat idea. It's not to become psychologists, but at least to be able to engage in a conversation on that subject.

Ms. Connery, please accept all our condolences for your loss, and thank you for being here with us today.

Ms. Lee, thank you for all the hard work that you and your organization do. Thank you for being here.

We shall break quickly and get the next panel.

● (0930)

(Pause)

● (0930)

The Chair: Thank you. We'll get under way with our second hour.

[*Translation*]

I want to welcome Marcel Hacault.

[*English*]

Monsieur Hacault is the executive director of the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association.

From the Ag Women's Network, we have Mary Ann Doré, team leader, online services.

Welcome, both of you, to our study on mental health for Canadian farmers.

We will start with a six-minute opening statement.

● (0935)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Hacault, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Marcel Hacault (Executive Director, Canadian Agricultural Safety Association): I'd like to thank the committee for allowing me to speak here today.

I will give a bit of background on who Marcel Hacault is. I'm starting to feel long in the tooth now. I was a hog farmer until 2004, so I've experienced all the ups and downs in the industry. I was also involved with Keystone Ag Producers in 1996 during the flood. They had tasked me to work with some of the groups there. I've had some personal, one-on-one experience with stressors in agriculture, in terms of both how they impact people and how they impact me and my family.

I'm currently the executive director of the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association. CASA's vision is to have a Canada where no one is hurt farming. Our mission is to make agriculture a safe and healthy environment to work and live in by helping producers and community partners see and manage risk. The mission is very much acknowledging that farmers work and live in the same place, and also that agriculture is more than just the producers. There's the community around them and all the people they interact with.

CASA has been around for a while. When I first came on in 2004, we commissioned a survey that was one of the first ones out there. At that time, it was a stress survey just to try to understand what the levels were, what the primary causes were, and whom farmers would turn to in times of stress. I have the link to it in the notes.

At that time, one in five described themselves as very stressed, and half said they were somewhat stressed. It almost mirrors what Dr. Andria Jones-Bitton has reported. In 2004, the primary causes were poor harvest and production, government policies and farm finances. Fourteen years later, I think those three are still pretty well at the top of the list. The farmers preferred to meet one-on-one, as opposed to group sessions or using telephone help.

In 2006, La Coop fédérée had a survey among its members. It showed that 50% of ag producers had a high level of stress. Again, that was very similar. The highest levels were for the pork producers, at 66%, with 48% for dairy and 36% for poultry. That's in comparison to 20% of Quebeckers who felt stress in general, so the ag population was definitely feeling higher levels of stress in 2006.

Just last year, we commissioned a study about the types of insurance, because employees often have access to employee assistance programs where they can access specialists and stuff. We thought, wouldn't it be nice if farmers had the same level of support through some type of insurance plan? We found that most farmers have access, if they want, to the health portion. Where there's a real deficiency is in terms of proper disability coverage, and there is an almost non-existent ability to access mental health insurance.

Having said all that, what has changed from 2004 to 2018? I think we've always known that farmers.... It's different from other industries. Most farmers see it as a vocation. There are long hours and unpredictable weather and crops, but they've always believed that the general public acknowledged and respected the industry. I think that has changed. The farmers feel scrutinized and attacked by the public—in essence, devaluing the profession.

We always talk about those bad apples. One of the things that have come up is that sometimes we see in the news husbandry issues where farmers are mistreating their animals. Dr. Andria Jones-Bitton would probably make a link there because it's often stress-related. As an industry—and I may be guilty of this, too—we often say that it's just a bad apple, when we should be saying that this farmer needs help. Where are we helping him through this time? The symptom is what everybody sees, but I think the underlying cause is probably that he needed help.

What's changed? Compared to 15 years ago, farmers today seem to be much more willing to talk about stressors and discuss the impact of those stressors on their mental health. That's why I'm pleased to be here today.

In 2005, we made some recommendations to the Senate Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology regarding mental health. As a result of that, the Mental Health Commission of Canada was formed. The first mandate focused on how best to help people who are homeless and living with mental problems. I would suggest that there might be room to expand that mandate so they could focus a little on rural, remote and farmers.

● (0940)

One thing we would like to see is the development of a national strategy that would focus on farmer and rancher mental health so that we could coordinate and share resources and know what's happening across Canada.

There should be support for a national stress and suicide prevention service. We used to talk about a stress line, but I think we should have a service.

There should be mental health research support, trying to get research linking mental health and wellness to human health and safety, and animal welfare outcomes. There are some technicalities there with ICD-10 codes that could be mandated so we could track some of them more easily.

There should also be evidence-based mental health resources tailored to meet the needs of farmers in terms of both content and delivery.

I think the Government of Canada has a critical role in supporting farmers and ranchers with its messaging. I often hear the message that farmers grow so much and that we're going to be exporting, exporting, exporting. Very seldom do you hear that we value the work that farmers, their families and their workers do every day.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hacault. Sorry, we're out of time.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Doré, you have six minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Mary Ann Doré (Team Leader, Online Services, Ag Women's Network): Thank you.

My name is Mary Ann Doré. I'm a seventh-generation dairy farmer, originally from Brampton, just outside Toronto. Because of urban encroachment, my husband and I moved to New Dundee in 2010. We moved the cows and joined a partnership with my brother and my parents. I met my husband when I was in high school, and he lived in Montreal. He had never seen a cow before we started dating.

I wrote an article with my husband about our story, with his anxiety and depression in 2017. That was the first time we spoke publicly about it. Looking back now, we're better educated on mental health, and we can see a lot of early signs and symptoms that we were not equipped to notice or discuss at the time.

Things that cause me stress are animal health, working with family—that can be the best and the worst part of my job—trying to find time for my daughter when we work from 5:00 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. and trying to find time for ourselves as we keep waiting for things to slow down. We have a hard time scheduling time for ourselves. Financial stress, changes in the market, social media attacks on our industry and the weather are all things out of my control, but they affect me directly.

All of these things also affect my husband, but he also has a history of mental health problems in his family, and his parents divorced when he was young. He moved around a lot and had a lot of financial stress on him as a young person. He did not grow up in agriculture, so he has had a steep learning curve. All of these additional pressures affect his resilience in ways that we did not understand until after we went through a crisis.

After our article was put on the Ag Women's Network website, many people approached us with their own stories about their own struggles. This led to us being invited to speak on a panel with Andria Jones-Bitton about mental health. After that, we joined her working group, which is a workshop of different farmers, industry people and mental health workers, to work on her program. I have been blown away by the number of people who are willing to talk about this once taboo subject and the thirst there is in this industry to finally do something about it.

I am here today on behalf of the Ag Women's Network, which is a five-year-old volunteer-run program that I have been involved with for the past four years. The group is mostly online, with topics including mental health, industry advancement, personal development, unconscious bias, balancing work and family, rural day care and producer profiles. We're starting our second year of a mentorship program.

Our motto is "Cultivating and connecting leaders for a strong agricultural sector". We have a website with blogs. Our closed Facebook group has over 2,200 members, and our open group for men and women has over 2,400 members. Anytime the topic of mental health comes up, we are always blown away by the positive outpouring of support. It is something that has touched everyone's lives.

From all of our conversations with AWN, conversations with Andria Jones-Bitton's working group through the University of Guelph, and conversations with industry friends and strangers alike, we know there is a strong need for a farmer-specific mental health outreach program. Farmers need something specific to farmers to feel comfortable reaching out. Being understood is very important when you finally make that big step to contact someone when you are in crisis.

There is a strong desire for a national resource that all members of agriculture and their support network can easily access. Having one national resource would avoid duplication and maximize resources. It needs to be simple, and it needs to be readily accessible if you have any hope of people knowing about it and feeling comfortable using the service. A national service would need to be open to everyone involved in agriculture and their support networks as well.

Following closely behind the need to help people in crisis is the need to support their support person. I speak from experience, and I have heard many personal stories of support people feeling overwhelmed and emotionally exhausted from trying to shield the person in crisis from anything that would upset them. In a farm setting, that means taking on more work and more duties around the farm and family to relieve the person in crisis from more stress. It is exhausting, especially when you are stressed yourself.

My hope is that the national service will be so commonplace and available—like telehealth—that they would feel comfortable reaching out before they're in crisis, and their support network could use the resources as well.

Farming is often a solitary job. It could be a nutritionist or a veterinarian who would be your first point of contact to discuss your mental health. They need to know what to do. Groups like 4-H Canada would benefit from teaching leaders the signs and symptoms of mental health crises, and training industry sales teams and veterinarians would go a long way toward sharing information and increasing awareness of those in need. The industry needs to have knowledge of the signs and symptoms of a person struggling and the next steps that should be taken to link that person to the resources they need.

● (0945)

The time has come for us to address mental health as a health concern. Everyone knows someone who has cancer and wouldn't dream of belittling them for reaching out for help, counselling or medicine. The same needs to be said for mental health.

Thank you so much for your interest in agriculture and mental health. This is a topic very dear to my heart.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Doré.

Mr. Lloyd, go ahead for six minutes.

Mr. Dane Lloyd (Sturgeon River—Parkland, CPC): Thank you so much for coming today. I'm always interested to hear stories. I represent a very agriculture-intensive riding. I had some cousins who were in the dairy industry. Unfortunately, we have only a couple of hog operations left outside of Edmonton.

You said there are a lot of things you can't control. You can't control the weather or prices. There's a lot of volatility in the industry. However, at this committee today, and in our capacity as federal members of Parliament, we do have some things we can control.

The area I would like to focus my questions on is the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and the problems that sometimes arise with CFIA and create unnecessary stress for our farmers. I can think of some particular cases in my area regarding sometimes negligent activity by CFIA.

I guess I'll direct this to Mr. Hacault. Should the CFIA be able to use, as a shield against any remediation for its negligence, the fact that crop insurance has been paid out?

Mr. Marcel Hacault: I'm going to have to decline answering that, because I've been out of the industry so long. I'm sure if you talked to the Canadian Horticultural Council, they would be able to answer it. I apologize.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: No problem.

Do you have any experience or stories about dealing with CFIA, and any recommendations on how you think it can be better, to improve the mental health of farmers?

Mr. Marcel Hacault: I won't have recommendations for CFIA, but when I was a hog farmer, all the programs out there that were supposed to help me weather the financial storms weren't bankable, and that was a tough one for me. I don't think that's changed. It would have been a lot easier for me at the time if those programs were bankable. Then I would've been able to approach my lender and say that we know this is coming. It's going to take its sweet time, but we know it's coming. I know this would have helped me way back when. I imagine it's very similar today, still.

With respect to CFIA, I'm sorry.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: No, that's fine. Thank you.

Madam Doré, would you have any insight on that, from your perspective?

Ms. Mary Ann Doré: I would say that it's often a scary time when you're involved with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency or the SPCA. Someone like that coming in means that someone has found fault with you, or someone from the public has falsely accused you of something.

However, I think we all need to step back and realize that we're all on the same page and that we have the same intent as all of the CFIA workers. We all want the same thing. Just communicating and not vilifying each other.... We all want the same thing, and we just need communication to share that we're all on the same page.

● (0950)

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Recently, a judge ruled that the Canada Revenue Agency, the CRA, has a duty of care to taxpayers. Do you believe it would be a positive thing for farmers' mental health if we were to legislate that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency also has a duty of care to farmers?

Ms. Mary Ann Doré: For sure. I think it's helpful for everyone to have a mandate of care. It's always a positive thing.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Excellent.

One thing, especially with you, Madam Doré, is the importance of family and family farms. We're seeing a lot of tax changes with estate planning and things like that. Also, a previous witness said that her husband was dealing with depression and died of depression because a brother had passed away six months earlier. Having family who are in the farm industry myself, it just seems to me that in some cases having your children, grandchildren, brothers and sisters involved with the operation seems to help a lot with mental health on the farm.

Could you comment on what you think some of the positives and then maybe some of the negatives of the family farm model are for the mental health of farmers?

Ms. Mary Ann Doré: I'd say it's very helpful, as long as you have a helpful family.

One of the biggest topics that come up that needs to be looked at alongside mental health is succession planning. There are so many different models of farm businesses, whether they're a joint venture or incorporated. There are lots of different tax implications with those things.

Yes, I think it's good to have family around, because you have someone else watching who knows you and might notice if you're acting differently. I think it's helpful that way, but because you can't leave your family, you can't avoid them sometimes when you're—

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Absolutely.

Could you comment on some recent changes to succession planning due to changes in estate and tax law? Has that been your experience with the stress on farmers, the mental health of farmers, over the past year or so? Mr. Hacault, feel free to pipe in here as well.

Ms. Mary Ann Doré: That would be hard to say, because I haven't completed my succession plan on our own farm. I know that it causes some concerns for people, but I couldn't say if it's positive or negative.

Mr. Marcel Hacault: My dad just passed away. I was the executor and we were trying to go through the estate. He thought he had planned it really well in forming a corporation, etc. I can tell you that you need a pretty high-priced accountant to help you navigate all that and understand exactly what your options are. It's not easy.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Did the recent tax changes have an effect on that?

Mr. Marcel Hacault: Oh, definitely. There was a heated discussion within our family as to how exactly we were going to maintain that fairness. It's not equal but it has to be fair.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lloyd.

Now we go to Mr. Peschisolido, for six minutes.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: Thank you.

Madam Doré and Mr. Hacault, thank you for your presentations. I must say they were very thorough. You brought up many points, and I would like to highlight a few of them.

Mr. Hacault, you started by talking about the different degrees of mental health challenges in the various industries: hogs, poultry, dairy. Can you talk a little about that and maybe explain why you believe there are differences, and what we can do to be helpful, as a federal government and as a society?

Mr. Marcel Hacault: That's an interesting question. I was listening to a previous meeting, and I think the same question was asked: whether supply-managed commodities seem to have less stress than open-market commodities. When I was farming, I had hogs and my neighbours all had supply management. I don't know if we were less stressed or not. I know that, because I was a hog farmer, I had to deal with much more volatility in my pricing. But there were also some pretty good years that my supply management neighbours didn't have.

As a general rule, I would say that, if you're a top performer, supply management offers a bit of income stability that the other, more open markets wouldn't have. One of the stressors is always price volatility, so I would assume that it would have less stress. Part of the challenge is that if you're looking to grow the farm, it is much more difficult within a supply-managed industry than in another industry where, if you have the capital and the business plan, you just make it happen.

I can't really answer your question as well as I would like to.

● (0955)

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: Mr. Hacault, you answered it very well.

Along the same lines, Madam Doré, you said that one of the issues of stress for farmers is the health of animals. Can you elaborate a bit on that?

Ms. Mary Ann Doré: Yes. A fact we talk about often is that no matter how well your day starts, nothing instantly deflates the group like a down cow. A down cow is a cow that is either sick or has fallen and hurt itself.

On Monday, for example, I came back after a weekend off. We came in at five in the morning, and a cow that my brother thought was getting better had passed away overnight. You're thinking, "That's awful. Okay, move on." Then, my brother and husband went into the barn to get the cows ready for me to milk, and one of my dad's favourite cows had fallen and was stuck. We needed to lift her and put her into the thing. That was two big things in the first 10 minutes in the morning. It's really hard. We're building a new barn and it's all very exciting and things are going well, but it just sort of deflates us.

We're very proud of and base a lot of our success on the success of our animals. We take it very personally that we've let them down when they're hurt. That's also why we get so upset about social media attacks. I recently left Twitter. I'd talk about NAFTA and things, and I just needed to step away from the Twitter world because we weren't accomplishing anything arguing about it online.

I think that, while we need to have a dialogue with the people who aren't from farms, it's a lot of responsibility for me, on top of all the other things I do, to have to be an "agvocate", as they call it, and defend myself. That's very tiring.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: You also talked about the importance of 4-H clubs. Can you talk a bit about that?

Ms. Mary Ann Doré: Yes, 4-H is something I've been involved with my whole life, and my brother and my dad are still members. It's a great organization to teach kids confidence, public speaking, and a whole variety of topics. I think it's a great way to fit mental health into all the subjects, because they can just add it into the dialogue. Youth suicide is also a very scary topic. If you can just teach kids more about acceptance and understanding their emotions in a very social aspect, I think that's another great way to reach people at a young age.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: Mr. Hacault, at the beginning you talked a bit about the interaction of farmers in the one-on-one versus the group setting. Can you elaborate a bit on that?

Mr. Marcel Hacault: When we asked farmers, if they were to go out and get help, how they would like to see it, it was very definitely one-on-one. They felt, at that time anyway, that it was the preferred method, and I think that still remains. Whether or not it's one-on-one remotely, they want a caseworker who understands agriculture and who knows what they're going through.

Just to go back a bit to some of the previous comments, I think what might be missing is that when there are animal husbandry issues and we get the SPCA or CFIA in, it might be nice to have somebody in our corner, especially if someone is suffering from mental health stress. Having an advocate in our corner to help us manage those people would be great, because generally if there's an issue with animal husbandry, I don't think it's done on purpose; it's done because there are underlying factors.

The Chair: You have a few seconds left.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: That's okay.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Peschisolido.

Now we go to Mr. MacGregor for six minutes.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Hacault, I'll start with you. It's very good to have you here as a witness, with your goal of reducing accidents on the farm to zero. I was just wondering if you could put into the record for us the link between mental health and accidents. Farming accidents can be very brutal and can lead to mental trauma later on, but also, if a farmer's mental health isn't really at 100%, can that lead to more accidents? We've seen the link between mental health and productivity. Is there anything you want to add in relation to that specific topic?

Mr. Marcel Hacault: Anecdotally, we say there's a link between mental health and injuries, but I don't think there's actually research proving it. It would be nice to have some research to actually see how close the link is and what the causal factors are, so if you were to do some interventions you would know when to do them. When you're tired, you're more likely to make a mistake, and I know they've shown that if you work long hours, it's equivalent to your being impaired. We know there are some impairment issues with lack of sleep, and if you're impaired you're more likely to get hurt.

To have some actual research that might demonstrate some of the links, and even to capture the data related to fatalities by suicide, would be interesting so we could develop proactive mechanisms to prevent that.

● (1000)

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: You've heard Dr. Jones-Bitton's testimony before this committee. She had three recommendations: supporting a Canadian network for farmer mental health, a federal funding stream for farmer mental health research, and evidence-based training programs for agriculture. Those are some things you can definitely get behind.

Mr. Marcel Hacault: We've been lucky enough in the past to have part of our funding from Agriculture and Agri-Food. Our proposal is currently going through the steps. Having talked to Do More Ag and Dr. Jones-Bitton, we've actually proposed the development of some resources for young families in agriculture. Do More Ag is doing probably more of the general, and Andria is doing some other stuff.

We thought, a bit like what you're saying, that for a young family struggling with multi-generational conflicts sometimes in the home, with young children and an enormous debt load, trying to get everything going, if there's anything like a break in the link or an added stress, or a child who maybe needs some extra support, there's really nothing there right now. If it is there, they have to run to the city and it might be four hours away. So really, the solutions are not there. We're looking at developing some resources for those young families in agriculture.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you.

Ms. Doré, you come from a supply-managed farming operation—seventh generation, I believe you said. I've toured dairy farms within my own riding, and it's been a fantastic experience.

I think one of the strengths of our supply-managed system is that every farmer says there's a level of certainty. They generally know what their income is going to be, and that allows them to do some long-term planning. Some of the capital investments they've made in their operations.... They are quite slick. It's quite amazing. They've opened up their farms to the public so we can all see how they're run, and it's really quite enlightening.

You talked about some of the stressors for farmers. When you look at it in the context of some of the recent trade agreements we've signed—CETA, CPTPP, and now the USMCA—supply-managed farmers have constantly been told that the government is there to support supply management. However, every time we're hiving off a certain percentage, you're losing that kind of certainty.

I'm wondering, because we heard from witnesses on Tuesday on this subject, how that relates to mental health. What does that do to the level of certainty within the industry?

Ms. Mary Ann Doré: It's very stressful.

I decided, with my husband, that if this trade agreement resulted in the loss of supply management, I was going to exit the industry. I was not interested in working that hard for consumers who didn't care to support us. I was ready to leave.

The reason I found supply management industry so attractive to join is that there's a stabilization and we can make investments. There's a joke that bankers really like dairy farmers and chicken farmers because they know that we can pay back that loan. My pig farmer friend complains about us, because he cannot get as big a loan as I can for the same project. The banks understand that I have a steady paycheque. Sometimes it's not as big as his paycheques, but it's always the same. I really like the attraction of one steady thing in all of the other crazy crops. We do a lot of crops as well, and it's nice to have the support of supply management.

I'm glad it's still there, but I feel like every time we grow as an industry, we give away a percentage with every trade agreement.

I can't blame this government for its trade deal, because that was an impossible situation to be put in. I don't begrudge that, but at the same time it's very disheartening to have all of your advancements given away.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: The percentages seem small, but they represent thousands of people.

Thank you.

● (1005)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacGregor.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Drouin, you now have the floor. You have six minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will be sharing my time with Mr. Tabbara. He doesn't come frequently, but he's here for this topic.

Ms. Doré, in your opening statements, you mentioned that we need to equip the 4-Hs of this world, and the other ag groups, with better tools to reach out to farmers. Is that correct? How would you do that?

Ms. Mary Ann Doré: Well, for example, one of our salespeople sells fencing and dairy equipment. My husband Joe and I were at a panel speaking at a farm trade show. The sales guy came up to us and said that farmers have been talking about this in the last year. It's very interesting that this is becoming more of a mainstay conversation. He's had eight farmers approach him to talk about their struggles. He said he didn't know if he was the only person they've ever talked to about that. He didn't really know where to send them, and didn't feel confident with his knowledge to get them to a counsellor or a doctor. That's a lot of pressure to put on people.

We've talked to our veterinarian about this a lot. Veterinarians also struggle with mental health pressures. They're often the ones who are there on your worst day when you're dealing with sick animals. I think it's about being able to train everyone in the industry to notice changes in people.

Looking back, I know that when my husband was in a crisis, he didn't want to go to trade shows and meetings that he used to go to. There were all of these signs of things that were very subtle. You just think, well, he's kind of grumpy sometimes, and that's fine. Looking back, you think, oh, that's a thing.

A couple of months ago, I didn't want to go to a meeting. I was kind of sullen and didn't want to do things. I realized something was going on with me, and I was able to sort of check myself and try to improve the situation.

With all of this extra knowledge and training of people to look out and notice if someone is.... If you walk into a barn and notice that it's not as clean as it usually is, that's an easy way to ask how they really are and to start those conversations...as well as knowing what to do with the answer once you get an answer.

Mr. Francis Drouin: I talked with a doctor in psychology who is advising major companies. She says they're developing peer systems and essentially training staff within companies to be those identifiers of mental health and that link toward extra help. Would you see something similar to this within the farming community?

Ms. Mary Ann Doré: Yes, for sure. People need to feel comfortable. This is a baring-your-soul conversation, so if it's someone more familiar to you, that would be helpful. But it's also nice to have someone else to call and talk to if you didn't want to complain to your neighbour or your family member. It's nice to have options in terms of people to talk to.

We've discussed before how having a counsellor on the phone who has an ag background is very helpful. For my husband, there was a long wait to talk to counsellors and psychiatrists. He was able to do it via video conference. He would go to the doctor's office and then talk to someone in a teleconference. He was in a room by himself. I wasn't eavesdropping in the next room. He had all of these things to talk about, and he could really be open. He could talk to someone on a tight schedule, and they could see more clients in a short period of time. I think that's an interesting way to go, especially with people being so remote.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you.

I'll pass this on to my colleague.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thanks to both of you for being here and testifying.

As the member mentioned, I'm not on this committee, but it's a very interesting topic that we're talking about.

I've been reading this article from the Huffington Post. I will quote part of the article:

> If you've idealized farming as an easy occupation, it's not. Farming is characterized by high stress. You live your profession 24/7.
>
> Financial pressures, livestock disease, poor harvest, climate change...can devastate farmers.

We've heard a lot of testimony from previous witnesses. Would you agree with this article that this is a field where we know there are stressors and pressures on farmers, but we are not tackling the issue directly? Are we addressing only the symptoms?

● (1010)

Ms. Mary Ann Doré: I'd say it's a bit of both. Other than a labour standard making it easier to get temporary workers to reduce our hours.... My husband and I always talk about how we need to figure out a way. There are five of us on the farm. There should be a way not to work 16 hours every day. We don't need everyone there all the time. Why don't we schedule it so that I do the mornings until two o'clock? That's a normal workday. My day should be done at one o'clock, but that doesn't happen. I stay until 6:30. We should be able to do shift work, but whenever you have crops and things like that to work on, it's hard to schedule time. If there were a labour market of specially skilled temporary workers....

There's a young man in our community who is the go-to person. I don't really know where he works; he works everywhere. He helps us and he helps others. He's just the perfect person to have in our community. We really enjoy having the flexibility of being able to say, "I'm really busy this afternoon, so let's just call Carson." It's hard to find skilled workers with that flexibility.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Doré.

Thank you, Mr. Tabbara.

Eva, we have about five minutes left.

Mrs. Eva Nassif: For me?

The Chair: Yes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Eva Nassif: What recommendations would you make to our government in terms of strategies, funding and awareness regarding assistance with mental health issues for farmers?

Mr. Marcel Hacault: I already made recommendations in my speech.

Mrs. Eva Nassif: Can you list the most important ones?

Mr. Marcel Hacault: The government's role is to provide the strongest possible support and risk management programs to help farmers manage the entire range of income.

It changes each time, and each time, you need to renegotiate with your banker.

The farming profession must also be promoted. Farmers are not just producers of exports that will help Canada.

These families are important to Canada. They're at the heart of food production. They work and take care of their animals, the environment and food safety.

Mrs. Eva Nassif: Are there challenges related to livestock farming in particular, and other more specific or difficult challenges related to horticulture?

Which is more difficult?

Mr. Marcel Hacault: The most difficult thing is probably when diseases force us to slaughter all the herds. In the grain industry, we don't have the same diseases. However, in the farming industry, in particular with beef and pork, a disease can force us to slaughter the entire herd. For the farming industry, this type of stress is different from the stress experienced in the grain industry.

Mrs. Eva Nassif: Ms. Doré, do you think that the presence of women in the sector helps to address mental health challenges?

[*English*]

Ms. Mary Ann Doré: I believe that, generally, we are better at discussing our emotions than men are, but as society moves forward, it's becoming an easier thing to talk about.

When I first talked to my dad about mental health issues on the rise, he sounded like no one had mental health struggles when he was younger, but a lot of people were alcoholics. It's about becoming more aware of what the problem is and having a name for it, rather than just glossing over it and saying things like, "He didn't commit suicide; it was a farm accident." No, it was suicide.

I think the conversations are changing. Having more voices at the table is always welcome. I find that women have always been involved in agriculture, but it's only recently that they are taking the credit for being a farmer rather than a farm wife. I think it's a very important change for people to take that position.

● (1015)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Eva Nassif: Do you have data on the participation of women in the sector?

[*English*]

Ms. Mary Ann Doré: I don't, personally. I know that more and more young people are becoming interested in it. There's a rise in women in STEM. We are part of that. I think it's becoming more and more accessible. People are becoming more comfortable joining boards.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Eva Nassif: Feel free to comment, Mr. Hacault.

[*English*]

Mr. Marcel Hacault: Farm Credit Canada may have some of those numbers. I do recall seeing the changing demographic of farmers. They were showing that more women were actively engaged and involved in farming, but I can't tell you exactly what the numbers are.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Hacault and Madame Nassif.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Eva Nassif: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Unfortunately, this is all the time we have.

Thank you very much for being here with us today to give your testimony. It's going to be very well received, and it will be part of our report.

We will suspend and then come back in camera to do the business part of our meeting.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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